

# Common Bounty or Common Grace?

By David J. Engelsma

*Dominion & Common Grace: The Biblical Basis of Progress*, by Gary North (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1987), xvi, 295 pages, index.

Contra Mundum, No. 2, Winter 1992

Copyright 1991 David J. Engelsma

---

As a postmillennialist who finds in Revelation 20:7ff. the prophecy that history ends with a Satanic assault upon the church, Gary North has a problem. How can the breakup of the victorious postmillennial kingdom of Christ be explained? And where do these ungodly hordes, “the number of whom is as the sand of the sea”, come from? The worldwide revolt against the Lord Christ at the end would seem to be a powerful proof for amillennial eschatology.

Not so says North. There is an explanation that accounts for both a future postmillennial conquest by the godly and final rebellion of the part of many ungodly. The explanation is common grace. Common grace is essential for postmillennial eschatology.

As increasing numbers of persons are converted in the future, they will obey the law of God themselves and apply it to the life of nations. The result will be abundant material prosperity as the blessing of God upon those who keep His law. Some of this prosperity will fall also to the ungodly (crumbs to the dogs under the table is how North puts it). These gifts are the common grace of God. Recognizing that external obedience to God's law and cooperation with the successful saints are in their best earthly interests, the ungodly conform to the millennial program. Their external obedience to the law is due to the work of the law written in their hearts, as the apostle puts it in Romans 2:15. This also is God's common grace. Taking issue with Professor C. Van Til, who taught that common grace decreases toward the end, North contends that God increases common grace as the end approaches. But His purpose with common grace is to prepare the wicked for destruction. North speaks of God's giving them rope with which to hang themselves. According to this purpose of God, at the very end the wicked revolt. “The unregenerate would rather rule in hell than serve in heaven” (pl 162). Immediately, God destroys them.

The central theme of this book [is that] God grants evil men common grace in the form of external blessings. Then He destroys them. The greater the common grace, the greater their rebellion. The greater their rebellion compared to God's common grace, the greater God's judgment against them (p. 165).

The postmillennial kingdom of Gary North will contain great numbers of unregenerates whose compliance with the laws of the kingdom is only external and whose motivation in living the life of the kingdom is merely the desire for earthly benefits. It may even be that the majority of people are unconverted. All that is required for postmillennialism is that “there will be large numbers of converts, and the civilization of the world will generally reflect God's biblically revealed law-order” (p. xv). Also required is common grace to keep the unconverted in line for a while.

North's doctrine of common grace, however, is radically different from the doctrine current in Calvinistic circles today. North himself calls attention to this difference. He condemns the three-point doctrine of common grace adopted by the Christian Reformed Church in 1924. He repudiates the theory of common grace propounded by Cornelius Van Til of Westminster Seminary. In fact, North states that “this book is basically a refutation of Prof. Cornelius Van Til's book, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, a compilation of his essays on common grace” (p. 9). North expresses agreement with the Protestant Reformed rejection of common grace as an attitude of favor toward the reprobate wicked: “On this point, the Protestant Reformed Church is correct” (p. 93). He praises Protestant Reformed theologian and churchman Herman Hoeksema:

Herman Hoeksema, who was perhaps the most brilliant systematic theologian in America in this century, left the Christian Reformed Church to form the Protestant Reformed Church. He and his followers were convinced that, contrary to the decision of the CRC, there is no such thing as common grace (p. 6).

For North, common grace is only the earthly gifts that God gives the ungodly, not a favorable attitude of God toward them. Common grace is “favors”, not favor. God's attitude toward the reprobate wicked is hatred. His purpose in giving the wicked the “blessings” of rain and sunshine is the destruction of the wicked. The gifts are rope given to the ungodly with which to hang themselves. “Common grace is a form of long-term (eternal) curse to the rebellious...” (p. 25). Similarly, the aspect of common grace that consists of the work of the law written in the hearts of the unregenerate refers only to their self-serving insight that outward obedience to the law of God spares them much earthly misery and gets for them much earthly good. Their “good works” are merely external compliance with the demand of the law. In reality, the works are not good. The reason is that, as totally depraved sinners, the unregenerate do not love God in all their seeming good works, but rather hate Him.

North is correct when he asserts that there is a basic agreement here between himself and the PRC. The objection of the PRC to common grace, specifically to the doctrine of common grace adopted by the CRC in 1924 and forced upon Hoeksema and others as binding dogma, has never intended to deny that God gives good gifts to the reprobate wicked, or that many ungodly people live outwardly decent lives, or that God restrains the dissoluteness of men in its expression in society.

What the PRC object to is the teaching that the good gifts that God gives to the reprobate wicked reveal an attitude of favor, or love, in God towards these rebels who are outside of

Jesus Christ. This conflicts with the teaching of the Bible that God hates all workers of iniquity (Psalm 5:5) and contradicts the biblical doctrine that God eternally reprobates some persons in hatred (cf. Romans 9:13). The notion of a favor of God toward all men invariably is accompanied by or leads to the Arminian doctrine of a love for all in the gospel and of a desire of God to save all by the gospel, which love and desire to save are then dependent upon the will of the sinner. This doctrine stands condemned in the official creeds of the Reformed and Presbyterian churches, the Canons of Dort and the Westminster Confession.

The theory of a restraint of sin that the PRC find objectionable is that which maintains a gracious operation of the Holy Spirit upon the heart of the sinner, without regenerating him, so that some good is preserved in the fallen sinner. As a result of this gracious operation upon the heart of the unregenerate, it is held, he is able to perform works that are truly good, albeit only in the realm of society. This, the PRC think, is outright denial of the Reformed doctrine of total depravity as taught in Ephesians 2:1ff., Romans 8:5ff., and the Canons of Dort, III,IV/1-5.

There is also agreement between North and the PRC in their view of history, leaving aside for the moment their differing eschatologies. North sees common grace as being significant for history. For North, this significance is that common grace serves the elect church and the establishment of the kingdom of God (pp. 57ff.). In this aspect of his common grace theory also, North differs sharply from the prevailing view. Many advocates of common grace attribute to common grace a positive purpose and value altogether apart from the church.

Throughout their history, the PRC have fought a lonely battle in the Dutch Reformed community against the concept of history that the Dutch Reformed theologian Abraham Kuyper spun from his theory of common grace. On Kuyper's view of history, God has two independent purposes with history. One is the development of their culture by an ungodly world by means of common grace. The other is the gathering of the church by special grace. These two purposes of God run down through history side-by-side, and never the twain do meet. At least Kuyper thought that the salvation of the church is the more important of the two purposes of history. Kuyper has disciples today who regard the world's development of its godless culture as the more important of the two purposes so that the chief calling of the church is to help the world as much as she can. The PRC maintain that the one purpose of God with history is the establishment of His covenant and kingdom in Christ. The ungodly world in all its developments serves the church. The church does not exist for the world, but the world for the church. And God does not exist for the church, but the church for God.

Ultimately, North grounds his denial of a favor of God toward the ungodly upon eternal predestination. North is a rare Calvinist. He has a Bible that contains Romans 9. He reads the chapter. He believes what it plainly teaches. He is not afraid to confess, in print, the "horrible" but biblical doctrine of double predestination (pp. 201ff.). And, *mirabile dictu*, he submits to the plain, logical implication of the doctrine—God does not have an attitude of favor toward every human.

The question arises [from Romans 9 - DJE]: How does God view those who are not

predestined to eternal life? Does He regard them with some degree of favor, or none, during their earthly lives? Do they as “creatures as such” or “men as such” become the recipients of his love or favor, “after a fashion”? Is the unregenerate vessel of wrath in some way the object of God's favor to “clay in general”? The Synod of 1924 [of the CRC—DJE] said yes. Hoeksema said no. Hoeksema was correct (pp. 204, 205).

Since North means by common grace merely the good gifts that God bestows upon the reprobate wicked and a work of the law written in the hearts of the ungodly that causes them outwardly to conform to the law for selfish reasons, he should give up the terminology, “common grace”. His usage is not the common usage. The Bible does not use the term. Nor do the Reformed creeds (the only time that the “Three Forms of Unity” speak of “common grace” they attribute the belief to the Arminians in the Canons of Dordt, III, IV, Rejection of Errors/5). North's insistence on employing the term to refer to the gifts that God gives the wicked, while rejecting any attitude of favor on God's part toward the wicked, results in paradoxical, confusing statements. Speaking of the ungodly at the end of the world—those whose revolt is a problem for North in view of the victory of the coming millennial kingdom—North writes:

He [God] has been gracious to them all to the utmost of His common grace. He has been gracious in response to their covenantal faithfulness to His civil law-order, and He has been gracious in order to pile the maximum possible quantity of hot coals on their God-hating heads (pp. 114, 115).

“Covenantal faithfulness” on the part of God-haters? God graciously piling hot coals on people's heads? Theology becomes nonsense.

Instead of speaking of common grace, North should speak of the bounties, or gifts, of God's Providence. With the Heidelberg Catechism in Lord's Day 50, he should distinguish between the “gifts” of earthly necessities that God gives men and the “blessing” that believers request from God with these “gifts”, without which blessing the gifts do not profit.

God's providential care of all men is the subject of I Timothy 4:10: “...the living God, who is the Savior of all men, specially of those that believe.” North calls this text “the key verse that describes two kinds of grace” (p. 5) and “probably the most difficult verse in the Bible for those who deny universal salvation from hell, yet who also deny the existence of common grace” (p. 22). In fact, the text does not speak of grace at all. Rather, it teaches that the “living God” gives earthly life and whatever material things that they enjoy to all men. He is the Savior of all in the sense of upholding their existence and supplying their physical needs in His Providence. The preceding context reveals God as Creator and as the Giver of material good things (vss. 1-5). These gifts are not grace to the ungodly. For the gifts, although good in themselves as creations of the good God, are good only to those persons who receive them with thanksgiving because they believe and know the truth (vss. 3,4). They are curses to the unthankful. Since the living God gives earthly gifts to the believers with His favor, He is especially the Savior in His Providence of those who believe.

It is noteworthy that, despite North's sharp difference with Reformed theologians who explain common grace of the favor of God toward those outside of Christ, he is at one with them in making common grace the basis of cooperation between the saints and the unholy. Common grace explains the cooperation of the unregenerate, “the number of whom is as the sand of the sea” (Revelation 20:8), with the regenerate in creating and maintaining the millennial kingdom of Christ. Common grace justifies the believers' working together with unbelievers in bringing about Christ's kingdom: “There can be cooperation between Christians and non-Christians... We can cooperate with the enemy in positive projects because of common grace” (p. 198). Cooperation with the world in his political activities in The Netherlands was also the purpose of Abraham Kuyper (in many ways the father of the doctrine of common grace) with his “gemeene gratie” (common grace). It was one of the main purposes of the CRC with its doctrine of common grace in 1924. The CRC intended to silence those in its fold who taught the antithesis.

But the apostle of Christ forbids this cooperation in II Corinthians 6:14ff. The passage makes clear that cooperation between the church and the world in building the kingdom of Christ is impossible. Christ will not cooperate with Belial in establishing His kingdom—He will use Belial, but He will not cooperate with him. Satan on his part will never agree to cooperate with Christ in promoting Christ's kingdom. Satan is foolish. He is not stupid. North deludes himself when he supposes that the sons of Belial will be willing to help usher in the millennial kingdom and then for a millennium to cooperate in supporting it. We have Christ's word for it: “And if Satan cast out Satan, he is divided against himself; how shall then his kingdom stand?” (Matthew 12:26)

North's thesis fails. The saints may not cooperate with the unholy, certainly not in the spiritual task of extending the kingdom of Christ. The ungodly will not cooperate in such a work. As willing slaves, they are engaged in building the kingdom of Satan. On North's own admission, the days immediately before the coming of Christ will see a Satan-inspired, worldwide assault upon the church of Christ. North's “common grace” does not solve his problem concerning a victorious millennial kingdom filled with unregenerates and collapsing in a Satanic revolt.

As a postscript, I only remark the utter injustice that North does to creedal Reformed Christianity and to multitudes of Reformed and Presbyterian Christians living and dead when he repeatedly charges them with the heresy of antinomianism. “The amillennialist must reject biblical law.... I think antinomianism is the underlying motive of amillennialism” (p. 154). The Reformed Christian makes the law of God the rule of the whole of his thankful life, as the Heidelberg Catechism teaches in its third part. He teaches it to his children. He witnesses of it to his neighbor as he has opportunity. Because of his obedience to the law, he suffers scorn and loss. But because he does not share Reconstructionism's belief that the Spirit will write the law upon the heart of a majority of the human race and make it the constitution of nations prior to the coming of Jesus, this man of God must needs be damned as antinomian (I remind Dr. North that antinomianism is a heresy—a soul damning heresy). This is a cruel slander and a gross injustice.

One gibe aimed specifically at the Protestant Reformed Churches is intolerable and may

not be allowed to go unanswered. North declares that this denomination “still speaks with a Dutch accent” (p. 110). Ja, dere you have it. Dit is da same old ting ve Gereformeerd Dutchmen have always had to put up wit in dis country. Even dose who are nice to the unregenerates poke fun wit us. Do ve speak met en Dutch accent? Met al mine strengt, ik zei, “Neen!”